

Why children set fires

Most experts agree that the best way to understand fire setting behavior is to look at where and why children set fire. They believe there are two basic types of children who set fires.

Curiosity fire setters are usually 2-7 year olds whose fascination with fire leads them to "play" with it to find out how it feels, how it burns, and what it does. They do not understand fire's destructive potential.

Although curiosity is a normal part of children's growth and development, parents and other adults who discover that a child is playing with fire should take it very seriously.

Complex fire setters can also be very young, but generally are 5-17 years old. In contrast to the curious fire setter, however, these juveniles light fires because of emotional or mental disturbances ranging from mild to severe. A crisis in a child's life, such as moving to a new area, a death, or divorce could trigger fire setting behavior.

The majority of juvenile fire setters are ordinary children in need: some are curious and experimental about fire; some are troubled and need counseling and other services.

Juvenile fire setting has many variables, such as age, motivation for fire setting behavior, type of fires set, ignition materials used to set the fire, and many others. The behavior of fire setting children is a symptom of a problem, communicating a need in a very powerful and destructive manner. The end results of child fire setting are costly to the child, his or her family, and the entire community in lives lost, loss of environmental resources, and property damage.

For more information contact:

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Youth Fire Setting

Guide for Parents and Caregivers

Youth Fire Setters

The number of fires set by children is growing. It is a problem that needs the attention of parents, teachers, counselors, and community leaders, in cooperation with fire service and law enforcement professionals.

Children playing with matches or lighters is a leading cause of home fires and one where the children and others present are often hurt.

Children have a natural curiosity about fire and are tempted to play with matches or lighters left within their reach. Children are twice as likely to die in a fire that they start themselves. In many cases, children who start fires have a history of fire setting behavior.



Fire setting behavior will not stop without intervention.

Consequences of Fire Setting

Juvenile arson and youth-set fires result in over 300 deaths and 2,500 injuries annually, and cause \$300 million in property damage.

Children as young as eight years old who are involved in significant fires resulting in property loss, personal injury, or death can be arrested for the crime of arson.

Charging a juvenile for arson is not an attempt to criminalize the behavior or to stigmatize the youth. Instead, it represents a way to hold juveniles accountable for their actions. It helps youth and their families take the behavior seriously and recognize the need for an effective intervention program.

Bringing charges ensures that this extremely dangerous and often-overlooked behavior receives the attention it deserves. Hopefully a fire that brings a juvenile to the attention of authorities is the last one that youth will set.

Parents The First Line of Defense

- Install and maintain smoke alarms.
- Plan and practice home fire escape drills.
- Keep matches and lighters out of reach of children; lock them up if necessary.
- Report all fires regardless of size to the fire department.
- Spend time with your children. Talk with them and listen to them.
- Set a good example. How you live your life impacts greatly on how your children live their lives.
- Talk to your children about the realities of the law. A fire that is set can lead to a felony charge of arson. This is a serious crime. Fire can destroy property, injure others, or take lives. You are responsible for damage caused by your child.
- Seek assistance if your child has started a fire or is playing with ignition sources.

